

Magic Carpet Ride!

Troy Bradley's Excellent Adventure
as a Ride Pilot in Turkey!

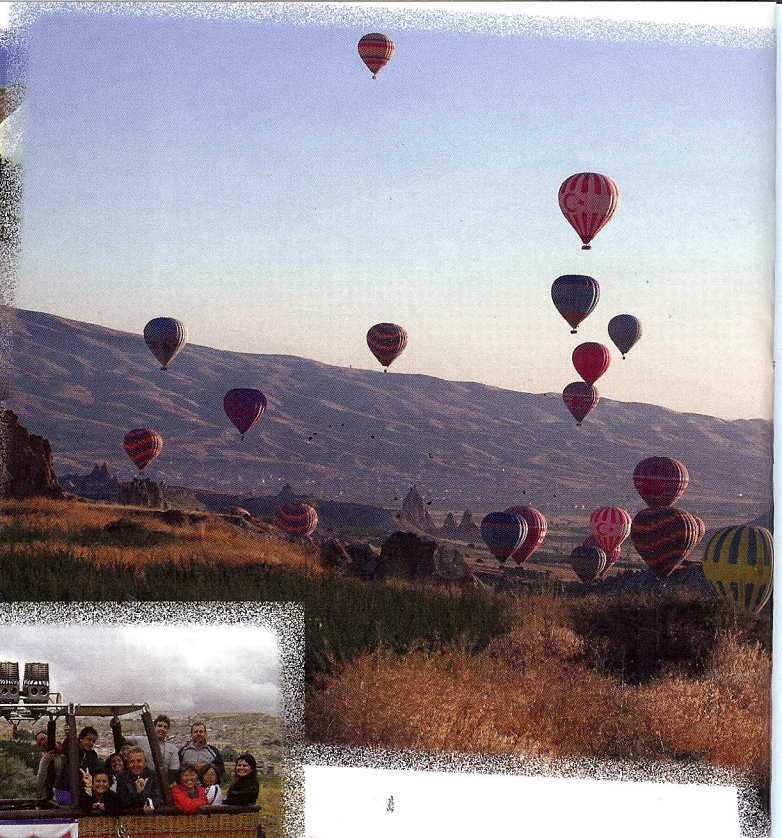
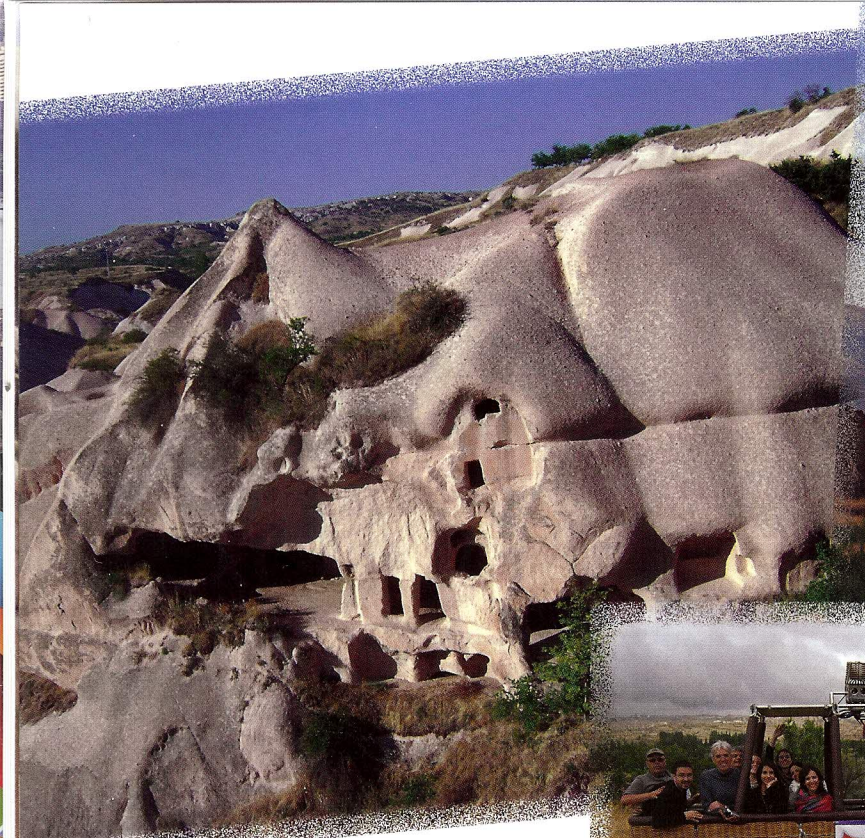


photo by Jan Stevenson

Story and Photos* by Troy Bradley
**except where noted otherwise*



There are horse-drawn carriages rambling through the cobblestone streets, no traffic jams unless the chickens get loose, and no rushing to appointments. Ever wished you could make time slow down? Coming from the fast pace of an American lifestyle and settling in a quaint Turkish village with no means of transportation came at first as a welcome change. Time slows down! I mean way down! That can either be good or bad. At first the slower pace of life came as a welcome change, an opportunity to stop and enjoy the simpler things in life. On the other hand, everything has a balance and the downside to the slowing of time is the anticipation of going home. As much as I enjoyed flying amongst some of the most unique geological wonders I have ever seen, by the end I was really ready to get back and be reunited with my family and friends. Or maybe, it was missing New Mexico green chili...



So how did I end up in Turkey? Beer. Not investing in a Turkish brewery or anything as remotely interesting, just drinking it at the Friends and Lovers Balloon Rally with my new friend Alper Katranci. Alper was in Albuquerque learning to fly. He and his wife, Banu, had recently opened Skyway Balloons in Cappadocia. I told him I recently sold my balloon ride company and would love to go fly in Turkey sometime. More beer and he said, "Why not now?"

I was available and he needed pilots with big balloon experience. A perfect match! However, being married and the father of two young children, it required a family discussion on the pros and cons of taking the position. My wife, Tami, who is always supportive or at least tolerant, thought it would be a great experience. The kids looked forward to visiting a new country. They are already seasoned travelers;

with Turkey being the 14th country my nine-year-old daughter has visited. Introducing the world to our children is something my wife and I have always made a priority. As Mark Twain said, "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do." So with the family's blessing and my endless quest for new adventures, I signed on for six months starting in June.

Having never worked in a foreign country before, I couldn't have imagined the bureaucracy involved in getting a work permit. It required signing the contract, a trip to the Turkish Embassy in Houston, sending many faxes, making numerous phone calls, sending FedEx packages, and visiting the police department in Tur-

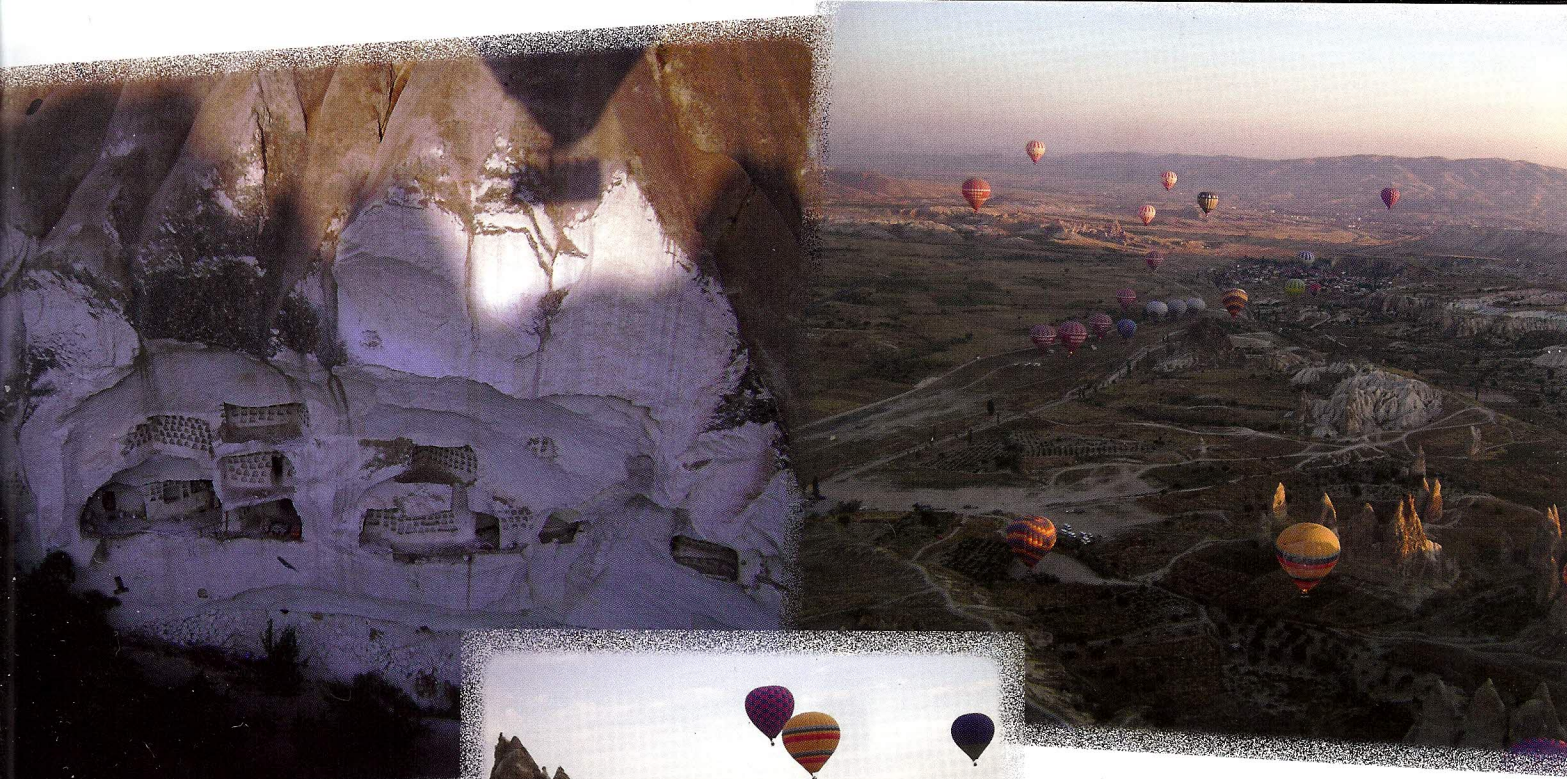
key. I also had to send my logbook and pilot certificate to the Turkish Civil Aviation Authority. It certainly was much more involved than signing up for a foreign balloon event; but I got through it, and was finally headed to Turkey.

Alper informed me that the Turkish CAA required a Class II Medical Certificate for balloon pilots. No problem. I went to see an Albuquerque Flight Physician and easily passed the exam. I was in and out in about one hour, only to find out American standards don't seem to be stringent enough for the Turks. So after more than 24 hours of travel and a short night in an Istanbul hotel, I spent my first day in Turkey at a hospital being poked, prodded, and analyzed. Just where I wanted to start this

new adventure!

My bones, blood, urine, eyes, ears, throat, nose, lungs, heart, and brain were examined by a team of nurses, physicians, and physiologists. Thank goodness it stopped short of a prostate exam! The staff, although very thorough, was just not very efficient in expediting the process. The exam took all day. I passed! Based on the meticulous assessment of my health, I must still have quite a few years ahead of me. I left the hospital in time to catch a late afternoon flight to Kayseri, and then a shuttle to my new home of Üçhisar, and then my first glimpse of the unusual landscape of Cappadocia.

Two large volcanoes, Mount Erciyes and Mount Hasan, through a series of eruptions spread lava over a large area of Central Turkey. Over time wind, water, and geological events have twisted and eroded these lava flows, sculpting intricate for-



mations, stunning plateaus, and fertile valleys. Then 5,000+ years ago humans began to inhabit the area further altering the face of this extraordinary environment with its fanciful rock formations.

The rocks are of the proper consistency to allow cliff dwellings and underground cities to be carved and created. These underground cities are like giant ant colonies some going as far as eight stories beneath the earth. For many early centuries of Christianity, this was a large religious center with hundreds of churches and monasteries built into the rocks. Inside many of these churches you can still see well-preserved frescos depicting scenes from the Bible. Contrary to what many Americans think, the Muslims are very open to other people's beliefs, as is apparent by the preservation of these historically significant Christian artifacts.

There is an awe factor

when you arrive in Cappadocia. You feel a sense of wonder at the surreal surroundings. Amazing in itself, but do I get to fly balloons here everyday in typically ideal conditions as well? It must be what ballooning heaven is like!

If Aladdin flew on a magic carpet this was the landscape he saw. Without genies and magic carpets the next best way to get an aerial view is from a balloon. The business of balloon rides in the area was established twenty years ago, but in recent years has seen exponential growth. Turkey is rapidly becoming a popular tourist destination. Of the couple million tourists attracted to Cappadocia annually, my best guesstimate is that over 150,000 of them experience the beauty of the area from

a balloon. I flew over 2,800 passengers myself in just five and a half months. There are currently 11 companies operating over 40 balloons and it is still on a growth curve! It is by far the "Balloon Ride Capital of the World."

A 210,000 cubic foot balloon is small over there, with most of the balloons ranging from 315,000 to 600,000 cubic feet. Yes, 600,000 cubic feet with a 32 passenger capacity! I would have loved to have flown that balloon a few times; however, since it belonged to one of the competitors it never happened. I was flying a Cameron Z-315 and a Cameron A-400.

The A-400's basket is really built for 20 passengers but they regularly put in 21 - 22 passengers. I think I should have had a stewardess

onboard with that many people! I used the turning vents quite regularly to constantly shift my passengers view even though almost any direction was suitable for some spectacular photos. With the unbelievable formations, lush valleys, and 30 to 40 balloons in the air it is hard to take a bad picture. Passengers never set their cameras down for entire flights. Even with all the time I spent there, I never tired of the geological masterpiece and took pictures on nearly every flight!

The weather conditions were amazing and consistently good. Situated between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, with Europe to the Northwest, one would think the area would experience more wind and moisture than I saw. The days weren't all perfect, but it amazed me at the amount of days that were flyable. Of course, the Turkish definition of flyable is slightly different than many parts of



There's gold in the hills of Cappadocia, Turkey and the hot air balloon ride business.

the world. There is no FSS to call for a briefing, but with the wide array of meteorological web sites I could piece together a pretty accurate weather picture. Fast winds were rarely a factor, but visibility on some mornings was marginally better than looking through a glass of lemonade. Thank goodness there was a noticeable lack of powerlines!

Flying in clouds is something I have never been particularly fond of, especially when there are 40 other balloons in the air. Fortunately, these marginal VFR conditions didn't exist too often. Of the 150 flights I did there, most occurred with good visibility and surface winds light enough to

land on the open trailer.

I didn't really need an alarm clock since there were daily pre-dawn calls to prayer broadcast over speakers mounted to the minarets all over the village. Luckily, I was getting up everyday or I might not have been too fond of this means of mass communication. Most days we would launch near Göreme, a small village filled with restaurants, cave hotels, and souvenir shops. This put us right in the heart of the most visually appealing areas to fly over and the light winds would generally keep you within close proximity to the launch site. On 95 percent of my flights I stayed within a twenty square mile area, seldom covering more

than a few miles on each flight.

Occasionally using stronger winds aloft, I was able to break loose and go for some distance. My furthest flight was 22 miles landing by the remote village of Kurugöl. The village came alive as word spread of the balloon, and by bike or on foot everyone made their way to see us. A shepherd, with several hundred sheep, rerouted his herd to come by for a closer look as well. We were so far from the normal flying area that many of the villagers exclaimed it was the first time they had seen a balloon. That flight epitomizes why I love flying in foreign countries; understanding that amazement, curiosity, and

smiles are the same in any language.

Language was always an issue with either the crew or the passengers. I learned many basics of the Turkish language and enough verbs to somewhat direct the crew. However, my limited Turkish vocabulary made it very difficult to explain things like we need a new o-ring or that really shouldn't be sewn by the village tailor.

The crew was a great bunch of guys who were very patient with my limited understanding of the Turkish language. My inability to speak any foreign languages was of greater concern with passengers. I took passengers from 37 different countries, so outside of trying to learn

Chinese, Russian, French, Swedish, German, Spanish, and Japanese they all had to suffer through my pre-flight briefings in English. Most days at least a few of them understood some English. I am sure those that didn't understand me thought I was playing an interesting game of charades, wondering what movie had bending your knees and holding on to ropes.

Fortunately, the need to brace for a fast landing was a rare occurrence. The typical approach to landing was very slow, with the crew patiently awaiting my arrival. Almost everyday I would level out just above the ground so the crew could guide me on to the trailer. Once the basket was strapped to the trailer I would open the top to begin

deflating the envelope. As the envelope slowly and reluctantly lay back to earth the passengers would disembark the gondola. As Cappadocia is filled with vineyards, we would treat our passengers to a traditional post-flight celebration with local sparkling wine. Each passenger would also receive an attractive first flight certificate. Before the envelope had even lost all of its air, the passengers would be loaded in vans heading back to their hotels. After the passengers departed, with amazing efficiency, the crew of 4 or 5 would pack these giant balloons.

While the flying was absolutely outstanding, the friends I made were the best part of my time abroad. I was able to witness local customs and traditions that most

people only read about or watch on a Discovery Channel program.

Sitting in a carpet shop drinking wine with ladies from Damascus, being invited inside a village elder's home for tea, partying with friends overlooking a canyon on a full moon night, or dancing at a Turkish wedding are some of the incredible memories I will always cherish. These people changed my views on a foreign land with which I was unfamiliar. I hope I changed some of their generalizations and stereotypes of Americans. I arrived as a total outsider, but left feeling as though I were part of the community.

Cappadocia is a magnificent area filled with natural and man-made wonders. The Turkish people were gra-

cious, the food delicious, the scenery beautiful, the history fascinating, and the flying unforgettable. My time there was an enlightening cultural experience giving me a much greater appreciation of a very different part of the world. I would recommend everyone visit this miraculous place sometime in their life and take a modern day magic carpet ride.



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